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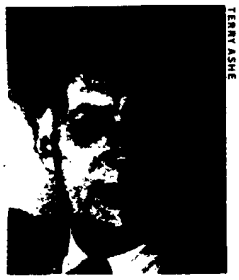
The Senators vs. the Spooks

Congress prods Casey into drafting a top-secret CIA master plan

The 40-page document, personally delivered to a handful of Senators by CIA Director William Casey last week, is stamped TOP SECRET on every page—twice. It outlines nothing less than the spy agency's proposed strategy and priorities for the next ten years. Top priority, not surprisingly, is given to assessing Soviet capabilities. Great importance is placed as well on counterterrorist and counterintelligence activities and on attempts to figure out trends in the Third World. Otherwise, no one who saw a copy of the plan, including the 15 members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and key staffers, would say anything about the contents. So it is not easy to gauge whether Bernard McMahon, staff director of the committee, was accurate when he called the drafting of the plan "the most significant event for intelligence in the postwar era."



TERRY ASHE

Chairman Durenberger

But in one respect the document is indeed of unquestioned importance. It is the first master plan Congress has ever managed to prod the CIA into writing. Accordingly, its presentation to the key Senators marks a potential turning point in Congress's unceasing battle to pry more information out of the secretive Casey—or, as Casey and many of his subordinates see it, in the legislators' efforts to run the CIA from Capitol Hill and spill its secrets.

The committee was careful not to crow. McMahon portrayed the master plan as "very much a Bill Casey effort." But the CIA director had ridiculed the idea of drafting one in a letter to Committee Chairman David Durenberger last November. He had already given the committee as much information as it needed, he wrote then, but "maybe there is not a full understanding of it."

Those grumpy words indicated the rising tension between the CIA and Capitol Hill. It is both historic and inevitable; there is a built-in conflict between the legislators' desire for enough information to assure themselves that the CIA is operating in the public interest, and the agency's equally pressing need to keep details of complex and delicate operations secret. What has kept the tension high through much of the Reagan Administration, however, is the resumption of large-scale, supposedly covert operations, above all in Nicaragua, that many legislators oppose but feel unable to control.

Personalities have played a growing role too. Casey has never concealed his determination to tell the congressional oversight committees no more than the law requires, and some legislators suspect he does not even do that. "Week after week, we pick up the paper and read intelligence information we have never known before," charges Vermont Democrat Patrick Leahy, vice chairman of the Senate watchdog committee. Casey argues that too often, "congressional oversight of the intelligence community is conducted off the cuff through the news media and involves the repeated compromise of sensitive intelligence sources and methods."

Since Minnesota Republican Durenberger became the Senate committee's chairman in January 1985, it has been demanding more information than ever before. Durenberger's avowed aim is "to put the spy novelists out of business" by stripping away what he regards as unnecessary secrecy. One of his first acts was to fire the small committee staff and replace it with a kind of miniature CIA of his own: 24 area and military specialists, systems analysts, economists and others grouped along the lines of the agency's organizational table and headed by McMahon, who was a top CIA executive during the Carter Administration. The staff keeps its
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Washington this year, their dispute is coming to center on the budget. But the dispute is muted because Casey is perhaps the only official in the entire Government whose spending proposals cannot even be discussed in public. They are buried in the Pentagon budget and evaluated in detail only by the 15 Senators and 16 Representatives on the watchdog committees. For all their misgivings, the committees approved spending increases that averaged 20% annually during the early Reagan years. Best guess as to the current total: $2 billion.

However, the master plan that Casey delivered to the Senate last week (it goes to the House Intelligence Committee this week) may prompt a far more detailed examination of the CIA's plans than ever. Durenberger has been pushing for such a document ever since he became head of the committee, on the ground that legislators cannot properly assess any specific CIA budget request unless they can see how it fits into a set of national intelligence priorities—assuming that one exists. As far as anyone knows, none did until last week. The closest thing was a paper called DCID 1/2 (for Director of Central Intelligence Document), and it was a wish list of just about every project that somebody in the CIA wanted to push. Durenberger says he will try to keep cuts in the CIA budget less severe than those that may be imposed on the Pentagon, but the agency took a deep slash this year under the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act and may be hit hard again in fiscal 1987.

What all the congressional pressure for more disclosure has accomplished so far is as difficult to evaluate as everything else about the CIA. The agency has called off some dubious operations that aroused strong opposition from the watchdog committees; one example was an attempt to destabilize the Marxist government of Suriname in South America. More generally, for good or ill, the CIA seems unable to keep any sizable operation truly secret anymore: U.S. bankrolling of the *contra* rebels in Nicaragua leaked out swiftly, and the Administration and Congress are now debating quite overtly the amount and type of "covert" aid to be extended to guerrillas battling the Marxist government of Angola. Even so, Congress remains suspicious that Casey is being evasive or misleading, while the CIA suspects the legislators of an itch to control delicate operations. Unhappily neither can be proved wrong. —*By George J. Church. Reported by Gregory H. Wierzynski/Washington*

DENNIS BRACK

Casey: trying to keep the secrets secret

Does Congress want to run the CIA?

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